THE VIEW FROM HERE / **Loudon Wainwright**

Exit Jack Ruby, a nobody with one big moment

It is reported that when he played cards with his jailers, Jack Ruby cheated. A fitting crime, surely, to be committed by this pathetic man who died last week, and one in keeping with the tawdry triviality of all but one instant of his life. The only importance he ever achieved came as the result of a coward's trigger-pull against the belly of a manacled prisoner, and the most ringing words ever said about him were spoken by the Dallas detective who watched his grotesque act and cried out in outrage and horror: "Jack, you son of a bitch!"

Yet Jack Ruby lived on for three years beyond his big moment, and when the massive blood clot finally ended his breathing, the world knew far too much about him. We knew, for example, that he was occasionally violent toward patrons of his nightclubs, that he was alternately morose and cheerful, that he was kind to dogs and showgirls, that to the end his eyes filled with tears at the mention of Mrs. Kennedy and the President's children, that he was, in sad fact, a true slob, by all odds the dreariest performer in the most terrible drama of the times.

God knows he came on strong. No American who was old enough to watch television on Sunday, November 24, 1963, will ever forget the wild scene in the basement of the Dallas jail. The mob of reporters, photographers and television men, police everywhere, Lee Harvey Oswald approaching through an inner door in a protective pocket of detectives—then suddenly a figure in a dark suit and hat lunges into the right foreground of the screen and reaches his arm out toward Oswald. The prisoner recoils and his face twists, he doubles up and starts to fall, and the scuffle tosses the camera into mad angles. It was an astounding electronic first, a murder piped straight into the living room, and it was committed again and again that awful afternoon ("Look, everybody, here he comes!") until finally it began to seem no more real than a moment of violence in the rerun of an old James Cagney picture.

Ruby's act and especially the man himself were in staggering contrast to the other views the nation had in those days. There were so unbearably many of them, all dominated by the incredible courage and composure of Mrs. Kennedy. The huge, silent crowd lined up to pass into the Capitol, the sight of that riderless horse jerking his head against the tight rein, the ragtag parade of great world figures walking from the White House to the cathedral, the folding of the flag—the grandeur of all these things surely had nothing to do with Jack Ruby. A sorry interloper who had presumed to seek vengeance for us all, he stood alone in grubby disgrace.

Four months later the trial began, and even here, where all of its meaning focused directly on him, Jack Ruby seemed far too small for the event. The trappings of big excitement were there. The setting was Dallas, a guilt-ridden city that could offer no penance for the President's death and probably no justice for Ruby's crime. At issue was Ruby's sanity at the moment of the murder, and the defense relied heavily on the meaty testimony of expert medical witnesses. Defense Attorney Melvin Belli, one of the most famous lawyers in the country, was flowery in speech, carried a red velvet briefcase and displayed a very short fuse. His opponent for the prosecution was folksy and clever, and the judge, whose sense of decorum allowed for televised proceedings, chewed tobacco and read magazines from time to time during the trial.

Yet with all the circus around him, Ruby, the center of it all, was shrunken and glum at the defense table. He was so totally apart from all the hullabaloo, so utterly demeaned that the trial seemed quite without reason, as if there were no real defendant. The death sentence, when it came, was the ultimate mockery. The sense of the world outside Dallas was not at all that Jack Ruby should be executed. It was that he should be pitied, put away and forgot.

Under the circumstances that was impossible, and Ruby's death, hopefully a merciful one for him, certainly spared the world from another long look at his moment of importance and at the factors that drove him to it. For justice, thanks to a higher Texas court that threw out the Dallas conviction, was going to have still another go at Ruby in another city with another judge. And though he doubtless would have got a more fair trial whose outcome might have found him guilty of a lesser degree of murder or even not guilty by reason of insanity, it still would have been the trial of a bad memory and not of the sick and hollow man he had become.

Jack Ruby's last months were haunted by the possibility that people would believe he had killed Oswald as part of a greater conspiracy. And the fact that the Warren Commission thought he had acted alone made no difference to him. He kept asking that he be given lie-detector tests on the subject and begging opportunities to demonstrate further that he was—even if a murderer—an honest man. Though they believed him, the authorities refused him, saying that his poor physical condition would make useless the results of any such tests.

How deep, then, must have been the despair he knew last month when he made sure the world would hear, in his own meandering words, his dismal story. He was in Parkland Memorial Hospital, where both the mortally wounded President and Oswald had been brought, and he knew that he was very ill. His brother had smuggled a tape recorder concealed in a briefcase into the room, and he told Jack Ruby about it in Yiddish so that the guard on duty there would not understand. Then the brothers spoke in English, and in response to a direct question about that horrifying moment in the jail three years ago, Ruby said: "Well, really, it happened so fast that I can't recall what happened from the time I came to the bottom of the ramp until the police officers had me on the ground."

There it was, his final version of it, and it might even have been true. Yet this denial, virtually on his deathbed, that he recalled anything about killing Oswald somehow diminished Ruby still more. By his own word his revenge, like the rest of his life, was little more than a convulsion.